

8. NICK

I need to head downtown to go to the main branch of my bank. On the way out, I notice a woman rush past me. I feel like I know her. She has a resemblance to Alea. I try to chase her down. But I miss her.

“It was all an illusion to begin with.”

At dinner, Nick tries to convince me that my search is in vain.

“She never existed. You have to forget about her.”

Nick and I play our game. I am trying to plan the perfect crime. To find the victim who has no connection to the suspect.

“It can’t be done.”

“Nick, what do you mean?”

“Look at what’s happened to you?”

“You said that it was fantasy.”

Nick puts the problem succinctly, “At first, there was no connection between the both of you. Now you think about her. There are traces of her in your memory. The connection is no longer random. You have to protect her against yourself.”

“What does that mean?”

“You send her flowers. There’s a record of your transaction. Evidence. You’re tied with her as a suspect. She could be my ex-wife. Now you have a motive. Jealousy.”

Nick has a point. Our experiment was already getting out of hand.”

“Maybe I should stop all this. Put her away. Not think about her.”

“You can’t close the book once you have opened it. She is part of you now.”

“That is the point. She is part of me. But I am not part of her. Nothing really connects her to me.”

“What is in our mind is there because there is something in the world that makes our knowledge possible. Somewhere there is something, a real thing, an object, a piece of clothing, a bit of videotape from a security camera. Some link between you and her.”

“If I destroy that trace. There is nothing.”

“But you made an effort. You came up with a plan. You took the time. That has to be recorded somewhere.”

I have this vision of her. Maybe there is another record of our meeting before. That is why Nick picked her out for me. A striking presence.

I am in Georgetown to look for a gift for someone at work. I see her. She penetrates me with her smile.

“Wallace, why would she have smiled at you?”

“Something in my personality.”

“She could smile at hundreds of men in a day.”

“She gave me that special smile.”

“It was only special to you. Or it was special because you came back to her and made a big deal about it.”

“There’s got to be more to it. It’s that silly story of yours. The Alea.”

“Nick, I swore it happened.”

“The part with the dead body.”

“Some of it is exaggerated. But I did know her.”

“I doubt it.”

“You said that there are always traces.”

“I’m just looking for action.”

Cheryl is planning the perfect crime with Nick.

“You can’t get a good person to do a really bad thing.”

“It happens all the time.”

“No, it doesn’t. You can get him to do a bad thing. A terrible thing. But he will retreat from what he has done. In order to get a good person to do a really bad thing, the worst thing imaginable, you have to first get him to do something bad. When he realizes how much his nature is corrupted, then he will do anything to save himself.”

“How do you get him to do that first terrible thing?”

“That too is difficult. You have to get him to do something that seems pleasurable. Then once he’s done something accidentally bad, then you have to corner him. Once he feels that way, then you really mess with his mind.”

“That sounds like a story. So the first step is the seduction.”

Nick offered his summary, “I just think it’s better to start with someone who’s already bad. He can do something really gruesome to get the ball rolling. He won’t even give it a second thought.”

“What’s his motive?”

“It doesn’t take a lot. He says it’s money. But he does it just for the thrill. The money’s just the catalyst. Adding a little spice to the recipe. But it takes off on its own.”

“That’s the whole problem. How do you make sure that the assassin is headed in the right direction? How do you make sure that he doesn’t end up coming after you?”

“Or is it you?”

They both laugh at the irony.

“We’re just talking!”

“Just talking.”

It is not their story. It is my story. It has and will always be my story. She knows that she can’t take the direct approach. A woman comes up to you and propositions you out of the blue, you find it flattering, but you wonder if something is wrong. Her beauty starts to fade in the sun, and you are facing down her psychological history.

So she has to work it more subtly. Maybe hook you into an ongoing story.

Cheryl has a friend Liza. Liza’s husband, Jimmy, has been shot in a botched robbery. She stands to inherit all this cash.

“Start over!”

Cheryl has a friend Liza. Her husband, Jimmy, has loads of money. But she can’t touch any of it. Her only way to get it is to get him out of the way.

“You mean if she kills him.”

Exactly. Don’t interrupt. You’re ruining the flow of the story.

“But you’re getting ahead of yourself. Jimmy isn’t just going to go down without a fight.”

This is where the story really begins. Liza needs to get rid of her husband. She can't divorce him. She loses everything.

"Nobody wants to go and just get a job."

They want what they think they deserve. Let me start the story over again. Liza needs a mechanic.

The game playing is getting exhausting. I let Nick and Cheryl play. I need to go.

I wonder what would happen if there was a Liza. How would she find her man? I feel ready. But Nick is right. I don't have what it takes to kill. I could push someone from a balcony in a fit of anger. But I don't think that I could take the time to strangle another human being. As I was doing it, it would get to me. I would have to stop.

We have been hanging out at a new restaurant in a neighborhood that I don't know that well. I am walking to my car when I see her silhouetted in the dark. I am sure that it is her. I race after her. She doesn't realize who I am, and she runs away.

"Alea!"

She is long gone.

When I head back I almost cannot find my car.

"Wallace, you're chasing a phantom."

I meet Nick at *Circumstances*.

"I don't know why you're discouraging me. The trail is hot."

"What trail? You see a figment, and you're sure that it's someone that you know. Why do you want it to be her? It was only heartache for you."

"I don't want it one way or another. It's real."

"You're taking our idea for a novel to the next extreme. You have this idea about this girl. Now you're expecting to see her on the street. It's not going to happen."

"You told me that I can't have an idea without they're being some evidence of my thought. Now that I see the evidence, you deny me."

"It's not just a one to one correspondence. For every thought, there are loads of real things out there. Loads of girls who help create the thought. For each person that you meet, there are loads of thought about her. You have to sort it out to make sense."

"But if there's so much evidence, it goes to my original point about my mystery novel. Nothing really ties me to Alea, because everything ties me to Alea."

"Now you're trying to direct things in your favor. That's when you do something that gets you caught. You start selecting things to go your way. You have to keep doing that over and over again. It leads to a mess."

"There's no doing things. There's the reality of seeing her."

"You saw someone who looked like her. But you never caught up with her to know for sure."

"I am sure."

"You want to see her so badly that you won't let go of your nightmare. It's not real."

"Why won't you give me my memory?"

"Because your memory isn't clear."

"It's as clear as my seeing you right now."

"You tell it like that now. But when you try to remember what we actually did or said it

will be hazy. In ten years, you won't even remember whether we were sitting here right now. You might even forget who I am."

"Not the way we're going."

"What we love, what we fear, all of it has a way of haunting our days. Or rearranging things to suit its emotional purposes. But there's nothing real behind it at all.

What is happening to me? I ask this question in an entirely honest way? I have a stable job. I enjoy my work. It is a creative outlet. I am being distracted by my imagination. The least distraction sends me in a tailspin. My desires are getting the better of me.

This is more than the distraction of a pretty face. I am more deluded by a good mystery. Alea's appeal was otherworldly. She offered a supernatural magic. This was the problem. She got entangled in her own illusions. She knew that she could overcome anyone with her charms. She was entirely frustrated when this ease was not universal. Once she got what she wanted, she automatically became bored and sought some new entertainment. None of this could last.

Her ghostly existence only enhanced her physical magic. She needed this resource to offer her more power. It worked in the opposite way as well. The more that people were turned on by her physical appeals, the more she believed that she had a special power. As she enhanced her supernatural powers, they took on a life of their own and threatened her psychic stability.

That was why she disappeared. She went on bouts of artificial stimulation so that she could increase her stamina. It made her believe that she had attained the feeling of completeness that she craved. She fulfilled her mystical destiny.

And then she crashed. She would always return after she had pushed her body to the limit. The cycle was continuous. I got caught up in it all because I believed her illusion. I provided her reason where there was none. I gave her phantoms real existence. She could live in this narrative of ghost dominating her psyche while I sought the appropriate counterspell. It was horrendous.

One thing that startles me is that I have no photos of Alea. My only memories are in my mind. Her image is burned in my soul like the sorceress that haunts my nights. I hate all this melodrama. But it is so accurate in depicting her influence.

I know that the night has another Alea waiting to swallow me up. I hunt the darkness in the hope of a new encounter. Will a new Alea make me forget the former one.

"Wallace, you are going mad? You have to pull yourself back from the brink."

"I know what I want, and I will find it."

"You are trying to make a celebrity out of this girl. She was a freak. Take it for what it was."

"You can't know. You have no sensitivity."

He is afraid that I'm drinking too much. He still consumes loads more than I do. I am getting my work done. He has nothing to worry about.

I have had no sightings for days. Either it was not her or it was someone else. I need something to preoccupy me. A new diversion.

Nick fails to meet me one night. I sit alone at a table. I am doubting myself. What do I really have to talk about. Only the same dull subject. My time with Alea. Everything seems to lack drama since she has disappeared. I don't really think that anyone else could fascinate me with such fullness.

Nick advises any distraction. He even wants me to again consider Cheryl. I admit that she is now the source of my new fantasies. But if I gave in to her, the complications would be endless. At least Alea could blame her problems on a possession. What in the world possibly possesses. She is still looking for a mechanic for Liza.

“Wallace, you look like a killer.”

“Cheryl, I’m starting to look like a drunk.”

The mirror of the bar is staring back at me. I hate what I see. Wait a minute. It’s Alea. I run out in the street. She is turning a corner. I run to catch up with her.

“Alea?”

Her hair is much lighter. The clothes are different. They seem cheery. I know that walk. But she keep on ahead.

“Alea!”

“I’m not Alea.”

“I know you.”

She will not look at me. I am sure that it is her.

“I have never been Alea.”

“What’s your name?”

“Cathy.”

“You have a lovely smile.”

“I’m not smiling. Do you always try to pick up girls in the street.”

“I’m not trying to pick you up.”

“You don’t find me attractive?”

“That’s not it.”

“Then what?”

“I thought that you were someone else.”

“Would you rather I was someone else?”

“No you’re very attractive. I’m just sure that I know you.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“I could buy you dinner to make up for bothering you. A girl’s got to eat.”

Cathy is a great companion for dinner. I say nothing about Alea. I am surprised about my eloquence. I thought that I was permanently in the dumps. A happy face has taken me from my depths. Such a quick transformation. I wonder why Alea’s hold was so temporary.

“I’m studying fashion design. I work in retail. I want a little more from my life.”

Do you read?”

“I’d like to read more. I watch a lot of movies. Mysteries. I like Hitchcock films. I love *Stranger on a Train*. It seems so true to my life.”

There is still something troubling about her. And she continues to remind me of Alea.

“You moved from Michigan. Do you like it here?”

“It’s not as cold as Michigan. But it’s so humid in the summer.”

She smiles at me.

I feel so comfortable around her. There is no sense of hesitation.

“Do you really like me?”

“Yes, I do.”

I do not want to tell her that she reminds me of someone else. But that is why I am so mesmerized.

“Do you want to come home with me?”

She has suggested this without any reservations. Outside the restaurant I kiss her. The kiss is more than I ever felt with Alea. It was as if Alea always held back something from me.

“Did you like that?” she gushes.

“Of course I did. I do. You know what I mean.”

Life feels fresh and new. I am starting again.

Her place has very little furnishings. There are a few movie posters on the wall. It seems hardly lived in.

“Let me get you some tea.”

I feel strange while I am left alone in the living room. She comes back with the tea.

“Is there something that you want to tell me, Cathy?”

“No. Why? Is something wrong?”

“I just feel as if I have forced my way up here.”

“Don’t feel that way. I want you here.”

I want to kiss her again. I know the inevitable.

“Wallace, you seem to be afraid of something.”

I am reliving the scissors attack.

“No, I’m not really afraid of anything.”

I have the strangest feeling as if I am falling down a giant well. Why do I feel this hollow? I have what I want. I have escaped the spell of Alea. Now all this is happening. My unease swirls around me.

“I can get you some more tea.”

I want to just get up and leave. I need to think of some excuse. She is sitting next to me. I can hear her heartbeat. I can feel her breath.

She takes my hand in hers. I hope that her touch might calm me down. All I can think about is Alea. This is awful. I am ruining things. She is close enough to be kissed. She is looking in my eyes.

I cannot be saved. I am forever damned by my past. My life is empty without recourse. It is not Cathy’s fault. She is doing everything that she can to make this better.

“I’m feeling a little faint.”

“Maybe you should splash some water on your face. Loosen your collar.”

I follow her suggestions. I am collecting myself gradually.

“I feel a little better.”

“You could like down.”

She lets me rest on her couch. I suddenly feel overwhelmingly tired. I fall asleep. When I wake the next day she is already dressed.

“You had a rough night. I just let you sleep.”

“Alea?”

I see her outline as I am just focusing my eyes.

“I’m Cathy. Sorry to disappoint you.”

I catch myself.

“I could hardly see. Sorry about that. I’m terribly sorry about everything. I ruined your night.”

I sit up. She has brought me breakfast.

“This might make you feel better. I’m going to have to leave for work soon.”

“I wish that I wasn’t such a nuisance.”

She smiles. “I’ve dealt with a lot worse. You hardly made any noise and just passed out. You’re less trouble than a pet.”

“I don’t think that you invited me here to have that happen.”

“We could try again.”

“What are you doing tonight,” I ask her.

“Tonight is not going to be good.”

“Tomorrow evening. I’m not even sure which day is which now.”

“Tonight will be OK. But it will have to be a little later. I have class.”

“That reminds me. I’ve got a class to prepare for this afternoon.”

I don’t tell Nick about my meeting. I see her for dinner. It is a Thai restaurant.

“I love spicy food.”

“I wish that I wasn’t such a jerk last night.”

“It was nothing that you did. You seemed a little sick.”

We eat without saying much.

“How was your class?”

“It was informative. I learned a lot.”

“You have to show me some of your designs.”

“I was going to show you last night but you passed out.”

“I’m wide awake tonight. All this hot food.”

“I like it here.”

I wish that I could be more animated. I am afraid to ask too many questions. I don’t want to mess things up. It seems to be going so well. Her spirits are still up. She is hardly affected by last night. It’s simply a case of indigestion or something like that.

She is reluctant, but she ends up inviting me over.

“That was a great meal, Wallace. I’m glad that I went.

“I enjoyed your company. I’m happy that you came with me.”

“When I told you that I couldn’t come, it was more like I didn’t want to. I had my class. But that wasn’t the problem. I just felt weird last night. But we had a great time.”

“It couldn’t have been better.”

Today she is sitting across from me. She sparkles in the light.

“Are you staring at me?”

“You look wonderful tonight.”

Her eyes turn down.

“Cathy, don’t be bashful.”

I want to kiss her, but we are too far apart.

“Do you want to dance?”

She seems all excited.

“There isn’t any music. I don’t dance very well. I’ve had too much to eat.”

She turns on her stereo and puts on a CD.

“Do you like this?”

“It’s fun. I like the beat.”

She starts dancing around the room. She pulls me up.

“Cathy, don’t do this.”

“You only live once.”

I am trying to move with her. She is doing all these swirls with her hands. I smile.

“See. Don’t you feel great.”

“Cathy, I’m trying not to fall over.”

She comes close to me and rubs her body against mine. Then she retreats.

“Do you like that?”

I follow her until we both collapse on the couch. She pushes me and stands up. She is laughing.

“Don’t you want it?”

I am staring in her eyes. I feel helpless. She turns the music up louder. She is still shaking to the rhythm.

“I’m going to do a strip tease for you.”

I laugh. She takes off her sweater and twirls it around. Then she tosses it so it covers my face. She pulls me close to her. We kiss. It is long and passionate.

“I want to be with you so badly. But I can’t sleep with you. Not tonight.”

I hold her.

“I’m going to have to go to bed soon. We’ll get together again this week.”

I don’t see her again until Friday.

We meet at the National Gallery. We are in the crossway to the Modern section.

“That fountain is wild.”

It seems like a waterfall. Afterwards we go for a walk on the mall. It is a lovely evening. I hold her hand.

“What would you do if I told you that I have a secret life?”

“I know so little about you. Everything is secret at this point.”

“A real secret.”

I tell her about my problems with Alea.

“I don’t think that I could take any more secrets. What is your secret?”

I am afraid of more supernatural revelations. My time with Alea had been such a physical drain on me. Cathy seems so different.

“I don’t know how to tell you this. But I’ve been keeping something secret from you.”

“Are you with another guy? What is going on?”

I am feeling dizzy. I am afraid of what I am going to hear. I can almost hear this piercing tone.

“Do you hear that?”

“Wallace, what is going on?”

“Alea.”

“Wallace, I have something to tell you.”

I am acting out the melodrama. This is so silly. But I can’t do anything about what is

going on.

“Alea?”

“That is what I’ve been trying to tell you. There is not Alea.”

“What are you saying?”

“I like you a lot. I’ve wanted to tell you before.”

“Is this your secret?”

“I know Nick.”

“Are you seeing Nick?”

“No, not at all. But this might seem worse. Nick put me up to it. I needed money. He found me. He told me about you. All your wild ideas. He said that you had a crazy imagination. I was supposed to play along. Make you think that I was possessed. You’d go along because you wanted to believe that sort of thing. I just had one problem. I fell in love with you. I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you then. But I didn’t want it to end.”

“Why did you leave?”

“I realized that it was getting out of hand. Nick was getting me to do more and more bizarre stuff. Someone was going to get hurt.”

“Did he pay you enough?”

“He paid me well.”

“What was his motive?”

“I don’t know. You have to ask him.”

“I feel like killing him right now.”

“I don’t think that he would have done this if it wasn’t for me.”

“You’re sadistic. Why did you do this?”

“You needed something in your life. I just was that something.”

“You crushed me!”

I can see that the guilt is weighing on her. I want to do something to help. But I feel such anger towards her. I am in conflict.

“I just want to get drunk, forget about this, and pass out!”

“When I saw you recently, I wanted to be with you. This should have never happened. It was so wrong.”

“Did you really need money that much?”

“I enjoyed doing it. I like being around you. I don’t know what made me do it. But I did it. I became her for a while. Then I needed to get myself back.”

“Why did you stay in Washington?”

“I was already here. I couldn’t leave. I had plans for my life.”

“You almost ruined mine.”

I want to hold her. I want to hurt her. I don’t know what I am supposed to do.

“I still want to keep seeing you.”

“I don’t know if that will be possible after this.”

“I needed to tell you.”

I take her back to her place. I am trying to forget all that has happened. It will not be easy. I call up Nick. It is late. I tell him that I need to get a drink.

“You can’t get a good person to do a really bad thing.”

“Nick, I don’t want to hear your shit.”

“You seem belligerent.”

“A little pissed maybe.”

“What’s got into you?”

“Are you testing me with that good person shit?”

“Is there something that I don’t know about? You’ve been in a different world since this Alea stuff. But tonight you are in the zone.”

“Nick, you did a great job on me.”

“I didn’t think that you’ve drunk that much. Have you been drinking before you came here.”

“I wish. I found out about Alea.”

“Did you find her? Are you trying to convince me that you haven’t been seeing things.”

“Cathy Jones—ring a bell?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You pull a job, and you can’t remember the particulars. I’m going to be your good person doing a bad thing. I’m going to choke you to death, you son of a bitch.”

“Hold on, hold on. Clue me in.”

“You clued *me* in. You paid her.”

“You paid Cathy. Told her to become Alea for me. You gave her a script.”

“You were in a bad way. I was trying to cheer you up.”

“What bad way?”

“You were having troubles at school. I felt that you needed something to get you in good spirits.”

“That has to be the most psycho thing that you have ever done. I might have gone over the edge. I’m still pretty close.”

“See. I’ve proven my point. We think that we have control. But there are these forces that act beneath the surface.”

“That’s bull shit. There are no forces. You are the force. You planned it. You knew everything about me. And you planned it. Why do you want to hurt me?”

“This is all part of our game. You could do the same to me.”

“Nick, when is this going to stop. With one of us dead.”

“Have another drink. It’s a joke.”

“I’m going to need time to make sense of this.”

I stand up to leave.

“Until next time, Wallace.”

I try to put this behind me. It seems like the most extraordinary trick that I have ever seen. I don’t hear from either of them in days. After about a week, Cathy calls me.

“I’ve been missing you. I feel like something’s empty in my life.”

“I need time to get over this. What were the two of you thinking?”

“I don’t know. I was new in town. I wanted something.”

“Do they do this sort of thing all the time where you’re from?”

“I want to make it up to you.”

“How the hell are you ever going to do that. Give me your blood.”

“It’s been tearing me up to. I’m not feeling like myself. I’ve never been depressed like this.”

I try to be sympathetic. I cannot. I cannot do anything at this point. I feel like my life is over. I make it to class. I teach my lessons. My heart is not in it.

When I usually come to a moment like this, I call Nick and he cheers me up. Now he is the source of my misery. With friends like this, who needs friends?

I imagine this starting all over again. Everyone I meet will have a secret life that they hide from me. They will lead me to the heights of my emotions. Then I will find out what is behind it all. Mistrust is my curse. I want too much.

“Wallace, are you ready to kill me?”

It’s been over a month. Life has calmed down.

“Did I prove my point?”

He is sitting across from me.

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re a killer. It’s in your bones.”

“I’m a fool. It’s in my bones.”

He laughs. We both laugh.

I see Cathy later that week. I don’t know what is going to happen between us. I am not sure if I am attracted to her because I still believe that she is Alea. I am waiting for her to take me to her magical land. I am waiting to hear from her ghosts. They will tell me what is right.